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## **[Review of] The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge**

**By Kevin Schilbrack**

### **BOOK REVIEWS**

FRISINA, WARREN G.

#### **The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge.**

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

xiii+262 pp. \$71.50 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper).

This book identifies an important topic--namely, that knowledge should not be understood as an inner representation of the external world--and takes an original approach to it. The representationalist, Cartesian understanding of knowledge has many critics these days, and here Warren Frisina begins to pull them together critically to sketch a path to an alternative, nonrepresentational theory. His book has three parts: (1) a critical examination of Charles Taylor, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, and Daniel Dennett as examples of thinkers in Continental philosophy, analytic philosophy, postanalytic philosophy, and cognitive science, respectively, engaged in the quest for a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge; (2) a constructive section that draws on John Dewey's pragmatism, Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, and Wang Yang-Ming's neo-Confucianism to develop Frisina's own more metaphysically adequate nonrepresentational theory; and (3) three chapters defending and illustrating his proposal.

What is a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge? According to such a view, knowing something does not have to do with mental images of the outer world. Rather, to say that one knows something is, in the first place, a statement that one can interact with it successfully. Frisina says (following Wang) that knowledge and action are "one thing"; he also says that knowledge is a "form" or a "way" of action. Such hints will need to be developed, and presumably Frisina would do so in terms of people's capacities, dispositions to behave, and "know how." There is plenty of work to be done on these emerging questions. Another issue to be addressed concerns the variety of positions that critique representationalism. For example, Frisina contrasts his nonrepresentational approach with Rorty's antirepresentational approach, but he does not make it clear whether he holds that knowledge is not primarily representational or that knowledge is not representational at all. Following Andy Clark's arguments that accounts

of cognition cannot eschew representations completely--for example, when speaking of knowledge of objects that are not present--I recommend the former.

What is distinctive about Frisina's approach is his argument, sustained throughout his book, that "one of the things hanging up our attempt to get past representational theories of knowledge is a refusal to address... basic metaphysical questions" (p. 4). Frisina is convincing: it is confused for nonrepresentationalists to argue that there is no purely mental/subjective realm to be set over against a purely physical/objective realm but then to claim that the implications of this concern only the mental realm. The assumption that a nonrepresentational theory will concern epistemological questions about the subjects of knowledge while avoiding (or worse, eliminating) metaphysical questions about the objects of knowledge clearly maintains the very dualism that it seeks to overcome.

So, what kind of metaphysics best suits a nonrepresentational theory of knowledge? Frisina argues for an organicist or panpsychist metaphysics in which everything that exists interacts with its environment without having an independent, inner self. With Dewey, Wang, and especially Whitehead, Frisina argues that "existence is inherently relational, that to be anything at all is to be a perspective on that which already is, that 'being' is actually the process of coming to develop such a perspective, and most important, that the process of developing such a perspective is ultimately value-laden" (p. 152). On this view, there is no ontological difference between the mind and the rest of the natural world, for human minds are rooted in and arise from simpler forms of organic activity and everything that exists is constituted by interested behavior in its environment. Given this continuum between the human and the nonhuman, Frisina's metaphysical position turns out to be more fully naturalistic than those who treat the mind as just "there." His position also overcomes dualisms--for example, between public and private uses of language, between sensations and cognition, between propositional knowledge and embodied know-how--dualisms that antimetaphysicians like Rorty still defend. Moreover, Frisina's naturalistic metaphysics is not closed to the value of spiritual practice (represented here by Confucian self-cultivation).

Frisina's use of pragmatist, process, and neo-Confucian philosophies marks his approach as not part of mainstream philosophy today; to use the term he uses for Robert C. Neville, Frisina is an "outsider." But those interested in this project will find more support in the work of Francisco Varela and his colleagues, who make a similar case for the embodied mind and the idea that thinking is enactive, that is, "not the representation of pregiven world by a pregiven mind but... rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs" (Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind* [Cambridge, Mass., 1992], p. 9). My point is not simply that Varela bolsters Frisina's work but that Varela makes his case for the unity of thought and action by drawing on cognitive science, Buddhist meditative practice, and phenomenology--three traditions in addition to the three that inform Frisina's work. And one can add philosophers of mind such as John Haugeland who explicitly oppose representational theories of knowledge or existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, who said that "knowledge and action are only two abstract aspects of an original concrete relation" (*Being and Nothingness* [New York, 1956], p. 308). Given a broader perspective of contemporary philosophical approaches to knowledge, one sees that Frisina is limning a significant point of convergence for a variety of philosophical movements, and that he is doing so in a way that, though naturalist, may be congenial to some forms of religious thought.